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ABSTRACT

A 28-year veteran elementary school teacher helps her students ask "real" questions (questions in which the students have a personal stake or "ownership") by forming small groups of students and then letting them ask each other their own questions. Many times "good" questions are seen as the property of the teacher or the textbook. Real questions (often charged with personal energy) retain for the students a sense of ownership. Maintaining the spark while widening the scope of the question can sometimes change a real question into a good question that is still real, still infused with ownership. Both good and real questions are scaffolded through the use of reading response logs and Book Groups in which students write a book review and then field questions from their classmates. In this manner, students are given several opportunities to reflect on work they have completed and then ask questions and make comments about their work with one another. (RS)

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PUTTING CHILDREN'S QUESTIONS FIRST: THE USE OF REFLECTION

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PUTTING CHILDREN'S QUESTIONS FIRST: THE USE OF REFLECTION

Today I will be presenting a teacher's view of scaffolding, particularly the scaffolding of children's questions. As a researcher I have taken to heart the call of Stephen North, who like myself is a member of a university Dept of English, and who calls for researchers to look carefully at the styles of language used by teachers to convey to other teachers what they know about their art. I work, like a critic, from the study of texts, in my case two texts: first, approximately 300+ pages of recorded and transcribed talk of one teacher, Suzanne Brady, talking about what she does and why, and second, transcriptions of the speech of 10-year-old children from Suzanne's class, meeting in a writing response group without the teacher sitting in.

In the spirit of Vygotsky (Mind in Society), I believe that children learn to reflect privately by first reflecting in groups. At stake in the writing response group is more than just the quality of writing: also at stake is the quality of reflective talk, which is internalized as private reflection.

By many yardsticks Suzanne Brady, a 5th grade teacher from Monterey, CA, 28 years in elementary classrooms, is ouststanding. Her 5th graders for many years, in mixed SES classes, have achieved a class average equivalent to that of an eighth grader on CTBS language and math standardized tests. I met Suzanne at a conference of Bay Area Writing Project people in 1982, when the film in which she features as model teacher of writing had just been made, at a point when she was beginning to give many workshops to teachers as a mentor in her school district. In the years

following 1982, partly as a result of our long conversations but mainly because she was having to explain to other teachers what she did in the classroom, Suzanne began to articulate her thoughts on the question which I pose here today: how are reflective processes taught? Though her word was "thinking," --"How are thinking processes taught?"--it's clear from her language that the thinking she refers to is a special class of reflective events--those in which children look back at work they have completed, then ask questions and make comments about their work with one another.

Your hand-out shows a piece of writing group talk that Suzanne regards as successful group thinking. That is, the children ask questions and make comments on earlier classroom work, in this case the writing they have done on environmental topics, all with the serious and shared purpose of making a class book. Noteworthy is Larry's ability to put his problem into words:

> "I need some help on, like, how to say that,
> 'cause I don't have anything written down...."

Scardamalia and Bereiter have said that the tension between what to say and how to say it deepens reflective thought. Larry has learned to make such tension the object of conversation with his peers. Equally noteworthy is the ability of Jenny and the others to help him continue to reflect.

Anastassis offers the suggestion to "put what you think." The helpful Jenny suggests how Larry might think about the damage that global warming would bring:

"Why, why do you think you should have to know?" she asks, to which Larry gives the reasonable response, "Well because, ummmm, I think it'll, it will, it might happen soon instead of, like, just

waiting till when we think it will happen."

Jenny not only knows a good question to ask but she also knows a good answer when she hears one. "Put that," she says, meaning "Add that to your draft."

We cannot discount the possibility that children learn much of their skill outside school, but I infer from the tapes of these same children made early in the school year, when their responses were shallow and pro forma, that Suzanne's classroom has taught them a good deal about how to reflect in the small group. How, then, according to Suzanne, did she lead them, especially when she did not sit in on the small group?

Suzanne has responded to this question many times since 1982 when I began to ask it, and since 1989, she has begun to use the word "scaffolding" in this response. She likes the image for what it suggests about her changing teacher role. "First I erect a structure and then I take it down." But she has strong feelings about the when and the where of direct teacher guidance. Like one grade 9 teacher of writing observed by Melanie Sperling (Freedman, 1987), Suzanne feels that she should do her guiding in the large-group session. She leaves groups such as Larry and Jenny's to carry on independently, even when they first begin to meet. Crucial for her is a "teacher stay out" policy--staying out of children's discussions at particular times in the schedule.

Within the last year Suzanne has begun to say explicitly why the teacherless small group is so closely tied to Ownership and how--in the case of learning to think reflectively--both Ownership and the Teacher-Stay-Out policy are tied to the notion of Real

Questions. She made this clear when I was talking with her about Brown and Palinscar's Reciprocal Teaching, a version of scaffolding in which children switch roles with the teacher in order to learn how to ask comprehension questions.

"When do the children ask their own questions?" she asked me.

"They work up to that," I said. "They get to that as they learn more. They internalize the idea of comprehension questions, then they ask their own. After they internalize, then the teacher takes down the scaffold."

"No," she said, "that's not the way it works. The children really do have their own questions at the beginning. They may not be good, but they're real enough. You start with the real ones, and then work on the good ones as you go."

"So you think Brown and Palinscar have got it backwards, trying to start with good ones?"

"Yes, I do," she said.

The definition of Real Question, which, according to Suzanne, had to be accounted for in any version of scaffolding, was something I heard more about last summer when the two of us talked again, and this time wrote together. There were Real Questions and there were Good Questions, Suzanne concluded, and the goal of the teacher was to see the two coincide.

Good Questions, though, were often the property of the textbook or the teacher. Said Suzanne: "Questions in the social studies textbook are Good because they are near the top of Bloom's Taxonomy--questions intended to elicit evaluation and discussion--but usually they aren't real. The children have no reason of their

own to ask them: they feel no ownership, no personal stake in the question."

A Real Question, said Suzanne, is easy to spot, often charged with personal energy--"electric spark," to use her word--even when not very "good" in the sense of "high in Bloom's Taxonomy." For example, "Why are you drawing him with **paws**?" came up one day many years ago when her second and third graders were sketching a mallard duck and his mate to whom they had fed bread crusts earlier that morning--a question posed amid laughter and great classroom interest on the part of third graders looking at the drawings of second graders.

Suzanne remembers this moment with clarity, and she has brought it up often in our conversations as the time in her career when she became aware of maintaining the electric spark--the children's personal stake in the question--at the same time she widened the scope of the question. "Why paws?" turned into "why webbed feet?" and finally into "Why do feet look the way they do?" In the end each child investigated the shape of a particular animal's feet and the survival value of this shape, doing so by means of reading, writing, and class presentation. A real question had turned into a good question that was still real, still infused with ownership.

So central is the memory of this experience to Suzanne's conception of her teaching role that she attaches the experience to her idea of "scaffolding." The teacher as scaffolder, in her view, has a two-part function: to scaffold the Real Questions and the Good Questions.

Take, for example, Suzanne's reading program, which scaffolds both types. Repeated four-week cycles give Suzanne time to make sure that both types arise and that the real ones have a reasonable chance to be transformed. First, she invites real questions by having the children write notes in a Response Log just after silent reading. "Write what you were thinking as you were reading," she directs them. She'll help them out for the first few times, she says, by highlighting in yellow all of the sentences in their Logs that show "thinking." For example, Tara, writing about the book Sounder, gets a highlight for her words:

> I hope Sounder is alive. I don't understand how much of his ear was shot off by the way they described it. It sounds like the whole thing. In the picture he has both ears. I wonder if ears can grow back or not. I hope they can.

By reading the logs, Suzanne can see the visible signs of reflective reading. After a few weeks, she says, no one needs highlighting any more; she takes down this particular part of the scaffold.

In addition, she gives her "thinking-when-you-read" speech. "This year," she says, "you'll be learning how to think when you read, which is the secret of being a good reader. How do people learn to do this thinking? It's kind of a mystery, but some children, even before they can read, have been thinking as they listened to somebody else read: 'Oooh, I wonder how that bad wolf is going to hide himself behind that tree so that Little Red Riding Hood doesn't see him as she walks by?' That sort of thing. It's saying to yourself, 'I have to figure this out so it makes sense.'"

Suzanne also provides a context in which to ask the questions

posed in the logs. The children take their questions and comments to a Book Group--three or four children reading the same chapters in the same self-selected books--doing this twice a week. They must meet without the teacher, says Suzanne, or else the real questions are not forthcoming.

To scaffold the Good Questions, Suzanne extends the process. Each child in a given Book Group writes a book review, then all four or five present these reviews in what Suzanne calls the Discussion on the Rug. The small group, now a panel sitting on chairs in front of the others, read out their reviews and recommendations, then call for questions from people on the rug. One of the people on the rug is Mrs. Brady, who raises her hand and asks questions of her own, thereby modeling different good questions.

For example, in the discussion of Sounder, several of the panelists have said the same thing--"They were poor, so poor they were starving." Someone from the audience asks a good question, "Why were they poor?" but the answer isn't exactly satisfactory:

"Well, they didn't have money."

"Weren't they farmers?" Another good question, asked by someone who assumes that surely farmers couldn't go hungry.

At this point there is a need for a question of definition. "Do you know what sharecroppers are?" asks Suzanne. ("The farms known to the children in Monterey," she told me later, "are agrobusinesses, and the children can't imagine a farm with so meager a return.") By the end of this discussion one child's question, "When was Martin Luther King?" had led them to try to

sort out the difference between being black, being poor, and being a slave. By this point even the children outside of the original Sounder book group seem to have the personal stake in these questions that made the questions not only good but also real.

Notice in Suzanne's reading routine the number of times the children have a chance to think again about their questions: the Book Group meetings allow them to compare their own questions with those of other children, the writing of the review is another demand for re-thinking, the revision of the review another, and answering the questions put to them in the Discussion on the Rug by the other children and Mrs. Brady is still another.

Suzanne's scaffolding fits precisely within the Bayer model. "Good question" is a **major concept** set out deliberately in the beginning of the year in one of Mrs. Brady's speeches, soon after the "Think-when-you-read" speech. Real Questions emerge from the children's **prior knowledge** on occasions when the teacher stays out yet the children are interactively engaged. The Book Group and the Discussion on the Rug are both **public sharing.** Suzanne routinely asks the children to reflect in large group by saying which of their questions in their small groups are "good" and why this is so, thereby **placing the student-generated information within the categorical scheme.**

Of her entire scaffolding scheme, Suzanne is most emphatic when she speaks about Real Questions. In her view, the Real has too often been removed from questions inside school. She feels she must provide the teacher-stay-out moments if which the real ones will arise, and also a sense of continuing ownership that will keep these questions real.

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"Putting Children's Questions First: The Use of Reflection"

Excerpt from Transcript of Writing Response Group
(four 10-year-old children discuss Larry's writing on the topic of global warming)

Larry: (pausing in the midst of reading aloud) I need some help on like how to say that, 'cause (softly) I don't have anything written down.

Jenny: O-kaaay.

Larry: So I need some help...in that.

Erika: Help?

Larry: Help.

Jenny: Okay, we have...

Larry: Well, like, I don't know what to put for, in it, on it..

Anistassis: Put...what you think.

Jenny: Why, why do you think you should have to know?

Larry: Well, because ummm--I think it'll, it will, it might happen soon, instead of like just waiting till when we think it will happen.

Jenny: Put that.

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